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SHALL WE TALK ABOUT DEATH?



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Part I

Around my friends, very few like to talk about death.

Death is a word that embodies such a negative set of connotations that little is being learned about it. There are many reasons for this. The most important being fear, accompanied by a tremendous lack of knowledge as regards what happens when the body dies. This is intermingled with religious and cultural traditions, which many of them have made out of death a taboo.

What do we have to go through? Where do we go? How do we go there? Why do we die? Do we actually die? What parts of us die? And, so many other questions.

In contrast, to talk about being born incites the opposite type of behavior. There is happiness and society opens up to all sorts of activities and goodwill. On a more mundane level, a lot of money and assistance go to research, education and health, and many people get very involved in the process of giving life to a new human being, or even an animal. There are hospitals and many schools of medicines devoted full time to make sure that this process of giving life is carried out in an impeccable way and within the happiest of environments.

I remember when my children were born in the United States I had all sorts of assistance, training, courses, and practices from pregnancy until they were infants. Almost all free of charge. In this context, I never forget, for example, when as a father (for fathers only!), I was given a course addressing issues like how to assist my wife psychologically and physically during and after pregnancy, how to change diapers, how to bathe a baby, what to do at night when a baby cries, and so many other useful and practical aspects of this process of giving life.

And, the moment a baby is born there is laughing, happiness,

and lots of congratulations.

If one is to compare the above situation with what happens during the process of death, or what is happening to the person who is terminally ill, or to other more subtle aspects intimately related to death, nothing is passed on to the dieing or to those closets to her/him. No moral support, no training regarding neither how to face that process of dieing nor how to deal with the situation that unfolds in the last moments of someone's life.

This is not just a moral or philosophical challenge. It is a very practical one.

Recently the father of a friend of mine died, and I so happened to be immensely privileged to assist her as she witnessed and participated in that process. First, the physical pain her father was going through out of his illnesses and then out of a last minute surgery on his leg. Second, the father requesting many very profound and complex things including taking his life away or deciding whether some specific medicament should be administered, etc. Third, the situation in which her father could just become totally dependent on machines, which would set him into a total artificial life. Finally, the whole spiritual happening around death without having any one to explain what is happening to her father, and how to assist him to understand death in positive and useful ways.

For other people, there are questions of finances, as hospitals, funeral homes, and cemeteries have become extremely expensive. Thus, an extra day in the hospital is to be financed and taken care of. In most societies, nothing is done about this; understood as a collective responsibility.

A few years ago, I happened to live in Chile, in a small apartment. The wife of the concierge took care of me and my dog. She was a wonderful old woman and super sweet and dedicated.

One night her husband came to tell me that she had just died.

Not only was I shocked, but also I had to engage into the process as they had no relatives, no money, and no where to go. Thus, the first set of things was related to doctors, certificates, and a number of other things that were necessary to officially declare my friend dead. This also included autopsy. Not an easy task. Then, the need to buy a gasket for her. How much money to pay for it, what size, and where to take her, as there was a tradition in my country to be in a vigil for three days, either in a church or in a similar quiet environment. Another set of complex and very engaging activities for this man who was totally alone. Finally, the cemetery. Rent a special transport and go the Cementerio General, where people can bring the dead bodies there. We, alone went in another car behind her car until we arrived in the cemetery. Where to go? What to do next? It was all guessing. We asked one of the employees who was kind enough to take us to the office and set the necessary papers to do the next step. Then, to ask someone to dig a hole on the ground to put her there. Both of us were pulling a little dolly around the cemetery until we arrived to this place where "poor people like her" had to be buried. The employee had a shovel and dug a hole that had all sorts of things in and around it, which I better do not describe at this time. Not a very beautiful scene. Then, the two of us put the gasket on the ground and buried her with prayers and mostly silence. Then, I gave him a hug and we both went back to our building.

Nobody was concerned about him. There was no system that I knew to give psychological assistance to the survivor. A huge tragedy for an old man, with no family to lean on.

There was a part of my life when I begun to assist terminally ill people. I did not know where to start but I knew that some inner guidance would come. And, as if it were a miracle, a friend of mine tells me that a cousin had a very complicated cancer and that she wanted to talk to me about it. I accepted the challenge. This was an incredible journey in the spirit and the sublime, not only for her but also for me. It is impossible to forget how she was encountering her spirit as she witnessed which part of her body was giving way to death. One day she would smile to me

and say, 'I do not have a live leg anymore'. The next day she will say such and such part is dead and I do not feel them any longer. As she died she was getting brighter and brighter, more aware of what was to be done to enjoy and learn from the process. Needless to say how much I suffered when she finally died in Geneva.

I have done this with a few people in this life time, and I am prepared to accompany many more.

Maybe I should also share that I have been so privileged to accompany some people in their state of coma. People, who after that process have come back to life as we understand it. A journey that for them was of tremendous importance and that carried a huge transformational impact.

Thus, a plethora of conceptual and practical issues most people know nothing or want to know nothing about it.

In the meantime, there is one thing absolutely certain: we are all going to die.

The intention of this article is not to tell you my own ideas and experience about death. The main aim here is to acknowledge that to keep thinking of death as a taboo and as something negative, or that it is better not to talk about it, is a major mistake. We all must know more about this important phenomenon as we are going to experience it, whether we like it or not.

Another complementary aim is to ask for more assistance to those who are dieing, and to their love ones. It is essential that this situation be supported all the way and that the process is nourished with tremendous love and compassion.

Do not fear death. Your fears are the result of your lack of knowledge about it. Thus, we should all open up to share and discuss the evidence that exist, the ideas that are being disseminated, and the conceptual frameworks that are available

from religions and spiritual traditions.

To ignore death will make your experience a less than desirable one.

May be, we shall talk about death.

Part II

It is certain that there are many views and perspectives about what happens during and after the body dies. All involve some complex frameworks, an ingrained value system, or a good number of religious and cultural beliefs. In this short article, one would not be able either to speak for, or to become an expert of, any of those views and perspectives. The short and, at times, incomplete descriptions presented here are used just for illustration of other collateral aspects of our lives and for pointing out possible behavioral attitudes towards death. It also may serve as an outline of group discussions you may decide to create.

Here, in Part II, we will address some unique frameworks and, then, open a 'gate' to see other possible beliefs or experiences.

There are people who believe that once the body dies, everything ceases to exist. No more body implies no more mind and no more spirit. Those who believe in this reality assert that there is nothing and no other form of life beyond that point and, thus, they believe in a very finite and clearly bounded form of material and spiritual existence. In essence, our life on this Planet does come from somewhere while, at the same time, this existence seems to go nowhere after the body dies.

One may come to a possible logical conclusion that everything and all which is to happen in our material and spiritual lives it should happen here and now, and it is within this dimension of our existence that we must frame our daily efforts and attitudes. Another conclusion might be that every time someone is born, she/he is then a totally new person, with a new body, mind, and soul, and a new being.

If one holds this type of belief, it seems natural not to have fear of death, if fear is understood as fear about 'the other side'. And, since there is nothing after death, what is to fear about?

In conversations with some of those who believe in this reality have stated that they indeed have fear and, therefore, this question may need further exploration.

Fear may indeed be real and arise as a consequence of some relevant factors or situations. For example, fear may come from leaving and detaching from something known to us: life in a material form (life in our human body).

Fear may also come from the need to cope with death not as an instantaneous happening but as an elaborate and time full process, within which many "things" are to happen. In this process, one may, for example, experience pain, or remorse, or suffering. Furthermore, and within the same process of death, one may be subjected to the attainment of some form of ultimate balance (karmic debts). In that case, one would have to "pay" so that equilibrium is finally attained at the soul level before departure from the body to a nothing state.

Fear to this process of settling one's accounts may also come up.

In addition, that process of death –perhaps unknown for many people-- could also be a source of fear and suffering because of a lack of knowledge. The fact that we do not know and that we are embedded in negative beliefs about death might all give rise to fear of the unknown. Thus, if death is a process and not an instant happening, lack of preparation to go through that process may indeed fertilize the grounds for fear to develop.

Thus, once again, it behooves to talk and learn about this process of death.

One might also experience suffering and fear as a result of not having had a happy life, or not having fulfilled some sort of agreed 'mission', or just a personal objective. But, this should not necessarily be translated into fear as there is nothing after death.

In addition, one may be unhappy out of the fact that one would have liked to carry on with this body for a longer period of time.

Thus, given just what has been said above, one may now focus on four major solutions:

- First, to expand and create dialogue groups to share and learn about the process of dying.
- Second, to meditate and experience the different dimensions of karma and the settling of karmic debts.
- Third, establish a serious curriculum for schools and universities, and practical activities, to prepare everyone for death.
- Fourth, to make a revolution in values and bring a more positive attitude towards death.

The above belief about death is rather different from a number of other notions, whereby we come from somewhere (the spirit) and go back somewhere else (also in spirit), or we go to where we came from. If a person has this understanding, life in its broadest meaning does not end with the death of the body. In this case, life is a continuum of material and non material expressions and manifestation, all of which going to at infinitum. Of course, within this group, there are many beliefs that are worth exploring.

For example, there those who believe in reincarnation and, thus, that our consciousness manifests many times in a material form, within some 'macro order' that brings coherence and rational to the process of coming into a material form. In particular, this coherence suggests that we have a mission in our spiritual evolution, which is enhanced and expanded by our experience in human and other forms. Needless to say that there are many different beliefs within this view and it is worth exploring this further.

Others assert that there is life after death but there is no such a state as reincarnation. We go into our spiritual form after the body dies and we never come back to this form of life again. There are a number of explanations of where the spirit goes, and these distinguish one group from the other.

In bringing these last two forms of belief, we are adding a fundamental aspect to the first one we addressed above: that there is life after the body dies. And, that this life is different from the one in our human body. In all these beliefs, we may be subjected to a great deal of experiences while dying, as this is a process and not an instantaneous happening.

These beliefs are not necessarily identified with a religion as there are many spiritual traditions (including indigenous peoples traditions) that have extremely comprehensive and elaborate experiences and teachings to share in relationship to life after death and about the process of dying.

Let us start by saying that for some life after death is a positive step as we go from an inferior form of existence (material) into a superior one (life in the spirit). For others, whether is a positive step or not it will depend on how you settle your 'accounts' or, to say, what you have done here and in previous lives (if you believe in reincarnation). One classic, and very widely spread, approach to death states that we may go to one place in the spirit if we were too bad, to another if we are not that bad, and yet another place if we are in good behavior during our material life.

How do we link all of this to fear of death?

In all the above mentioned beliefs, fear may arise from many possible angles, particularly when the level of ignorance is very high.

But fear of death also comes from not having a clear idea about how to prepare oneself for the next life and for the process of dying. And, it is important to say that there are many and

complex aspects within the process of dying, depending on what you believe is to happen with your life after death.

Sometimes the fear of death is so great that people prefer to know nothing and leave all to the hands of something or someone.

In all of this, faith, understood in a very traditional sense (i.e., believing in someone) tends to pacify fear in some cases. This is the situation when people believe in a Superior Being and expect that this Being will handle the process. Faith may do wonders although if faith is to be self realized, this process is not trivial. Many people think that faith is believing in someone or something. This is too gross of a concept to have any validity. In a spiritual sense, faith is the result of a deep and thorough process of infinite detachment from every one and everything. And, it is important to know that the way to the self realization of faith is indeed total detachment, and not a theoretical proposition that we accept as a given and immutable.

Furthermore, surrendering could play a fundamental factor in eliminating fear. This is to say, surrendering to a given concept of death, or to a process of death, or to the Superior Being. Here, again, it may be worthwhile to discuss the real spiritual meaning of surrendering: to be infinitely open and available to be or to become the other. It is not just be willing to serve or to obey someone, as it is most commonly understood in our material reality. However, it is important to note that surrendering is not an automatic happening. Surrendering is a state of being that is to be self realized.

To those who believe in reincarnation and in having a 'mission' to accomplish within the path of our spiritual and material evolution, fear may arise from the fact that we forgot about our mission. That we have little idea now in our material life of what was the mission we came to accomplish here on Earth. The fear is in relation to that missing mission.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and elaborate understanding

of the process of death is that one by the Tibetans Buddhists. For them, death is a process that begins at conception. In their philosophy, aging is a fundamental dimension of human life and one of the key sources of human suffering. Thus, dieing is an experience we have during our entire life. However, for the purpose of this note we are now to focus on our last days in a material vehicle, like the human body. For them many things will be happening during that moment as we begin to experience the ceasing of the nature and functions of our five elements: fire, water, earth, wind and space. In many ways, this is a reversal to being born.

Without getting into the details of the above understanding of death, they have established a very thorough understanding and a series of practices to prepare to that final moment of transformation. Once we leave the body, there are many spaces and situations in front of us. All depend on our state of consciousness, coherence, karmatic accounts and many more considerations. Tibetans also believe in reincarnation and do not have a traditional notion of God. They believe that fear is essentially a result of ignorance. The ceremonies that are done during death and afterwards (for many days) are extremely interesting and full of subtle transformations.

Why should we get prepared? Foremost because it is important to understand, and, if possible, to experience, some of the states we would experience during death. It is like training for a competition. It is always better to train and not to go cold and without having experience it before. The whole process will be easier and more pleasant and peaceful. As you experience the return to the spirit, you will enjoy it more and will learn also to be more conscious through that process.

This note has been written not with the view to convince you of some one else's views on death and the process of dieing. On the contrary, its intent is to strengthen your experience and your own way of understanding death.

So, to the question 'Shall we talk about de death?' --the title of this note-- the answer is a definite Yes

